Methods to Improve Reading Skills of Primary School Students: A Review

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Abstract

Reading is a foundational pillar of cognitive development and academic achievement, particularly during the primary years. Early interventions and sustained support in reading not only foster success in language but also positively influence learning across disciplines, shaping lifelong learning trajectories. This review investigates diverse methods for improving the reading skills of primary school students, encompassing strategies such as systematic phonics instruction, whole language approaches, digital interventions, inclusive and differentiated instruction, and teacher professional development. Drawing on recent Indian and international research studies, theses, and major agency reports published from 2020 to July 2024, the paper analyses contextual effectiveness, cost, and scalability of each method. Comparative tables and conceptual frameworks are used to summarize findings and synthesize best practices. The paper concludes with evidence-based recommendations for schools and policymakers to ensure every child attains strong foundational reading skills.

Keywords

Reading Skills, Primary Education, Foundational Literacy, Pedagogy Phonics, Teacher Development

Introduction

Reading proficiency is critical to educational attainment, personal growth, and socio-economic participation. Children's reading competence by the end of primary grades forecasts their future learning outcomes and lifelong employability (World Bank, 2022). However, despite policy attention and interventions, literacy gaps are persistent, especially in developing countries including India, due to disparities in resource availability, teaching quality, language diversity, and the COVID-19 pandemic's learning disruptions. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023, nearly half of Indian Grade 3 students cannot read a Grade 1-level text, highlighting an urgent need for effective and scalable solutions (Pratham, 2023). Similarly, international assessments like PIRLS 2021 (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) show declining trends in reading comprehension skills post-pandemic. These indicators urge a closer look at evidence-based interventions to boost reading performance in early grades.

Global research indicates that no single method suffices to meet diverse learner needs; rather, a context-sensitive integration of approaches yields the best outcomes (UNESCO, 2023; EEF, 2023). This paper provides a comprehensive review of the key reading skill improvement methods for primary students, systematically comparing Indian and international strategies, and culminating in an actionable framework for policy and classroom practice.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted using peer-reviewed databases (ERIC, Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar) and the latest agency reports from 2020 to July 2024. Keywords included "early grade reading," "primary school literacy," "phonics instruction," "inclusive reading interventions," and "teacher training." Indian sources such as ASER, NCERT Outcome Frameworks, and DIKSHA, as well as global agencies (World Bank, UNESCO, EEF, USAID), were prioritized. Both qualitative and quantitative studies, meta-analyses, and dissertations were examined. The methods were categorized into (i) phonics-based, (ii) whole language, (iii) digital/blended, (iv) inclusive/differentiated, and (v) teacher professional development. Findings were summarized into comparative tables, followed by analytical discussion, best practices, and a conceptual framework.

Literature Review

Like studies by Neelofar et.al (2024) on effectiveness of teaching strategies adopted by mathematics teachers in classroom teaching indicated different strategies to improve mathematical skills of elementary students by raising interest by curbing phobia to enhance self- efficacy that ultimately will lead to the better performance, similarly some of the identified strategies to improve reading skills are:

Phonics-Based Instruction

Phonics, the explicit teaching of letter-sound correspondence, remains central to foundational literacy. Recent large-scale reviews and RCTs from EEF (2023) and meta-analyses from Indian research (Azim Premji University, 2023) show that structured phonics programs (such as GraphoLearn, Jolly Phonics, and government initiatives under NIPUN Bharat) reliably lead to significant gains in word decoding, spelling, and reading fluency.

Evidence highlights that systematic, daily phonics instruction, particularly in the first three years of schooling, is especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and multilingual contexts (IDB, 2020; NCERT, 2021). Indian interventions using phonics have led to more than 20% improvement in foundational skills within a year of implementation (Pratham, 2023).

Whole Language Approach

The whole language approach advocates immersive exposure to rich, authentic texts and learning to read for meaning, rather than through explicit decoding drills (Lin, 2024). While it has shown moderate success in promoting enjoyment and comprehension, its effectiveness is limited for learners who lack foundational decoding skills or have little exposure to print (Dahl-Leonard et al., 2024). Internationally and in India, whole language is now most often used as a complementary strategy to structured phonics, providing context and motivation through diverse literature and story-based activities (Orellana, 2024).

Digital and Blended Interventions

The shift to technology-assisted learning, hastened by pandemic-driven school closures, has energized the development of digital reading platforms, such as DIKSHA (India), Lexia Core5 (U.S./U.K.), and hybrid models using AR or AI (Dahl-Leonard et al., 2024; Hidayat, 2024). Meta-analyses report that adaptive digital programs—when used to supplement classroom instruction—significantly advance phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension, especially for struggling or remote learners (Dixon, 2024).

Indian digital initiatives have reported notable success: DIKSHA's widespread reach has supported over 30 million learners and teachers in foundational skill-building, while Pratham's digital libraries and WhatsApp activity pilots shown measurable reading gains during the COVID-19 disruption (Pratham, 2023).

Inclusive and Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction tailors content and pace to learner needs. A study by RCI India (2022) found that using storyboards and multisensory activities improved outcomes among children with learning disabilities. Similarly, implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks in South Africa's primary schools showed enhanced reading retention (UNESCO, 2021).

Gender-sensitive and multilingual approaches are also key. Research from Eklavya Foundation (2023) highlights that when home languages are honored in early grades, comprehension deepens, especially for tribal and rural children.

Inclusive education ensures that reading instruction is adapted for learners with diverse abilities, linguistic backgrounds, and learning profiles. Indian research (Azim Premji University, 2023) demonstrates the value of peer tutoring, response to intervention (RTI), and small-group reading for children needing extra support, including those with learning disabilities and English Language Learners. Global models recommend differentiated content, flexible grouping, and culturally relevant materials, which foster greater equity and prevent reading failure.

Teacher Professional Development

No reading intervention succeeds without trained teachers. Some studies indicated the importance of MOOCs for Teachers professional Development (Verma.P. & Husain, A., 2018) but also indicated updation required for better learning emphasized the role of MOOCs (Verma, P. & Husain, A.,2020). India's NISHTHA program reached over 2 million teachers with online training modules on early literacy (MHRD, 2021).In India, Room to Read's Literacy Instruction Model trained over 7,000 teachers, leading to measurable improvements in student performance (Room to Read, 2022).

Ongoing professional development is a key determinant of successful reading instruction. Training that blends online modules, in-person mentoring, and peer collaboration—such as India's NISHTHA and EEL's coaching programs—enhances teachers' ability to deliver structured, responsive, and inclusive reading lessons (Bucheit, 2023; EEF, 2023). Both Indian and global evidence stress the importance of continuous, practice-linked teacher learning for sustained improvements in classroom reading outcomes.

Analysis of Indian and International Agency Reports

Indian Agency Reports

1. **Pratham's ASER (2023):** As India's largest independent education assessment, ASER finds that although enrollment is nearly universal at primary level, only 43% of Grade 3 students can read a Grade 1-level text. NIPUN Bharat and state-led foundational literacy missions have accelerated progress through the adoption of daily phonics, community reading volunteers, and teacher coaching modules, but wide disparities persist between urban and rural, and government and private schools (Pratham, 2023).
2. **NCERT/DIKSHA Frameworks (2021–2024):** NCERT's learning outcome benchmarks and DIKSHA's digital platform have scaled teacher capacity-building, lesson planning, and child-focused assessments. Data indicates increased student engagement and notable improvements in reading levels in states with high teacher participation in the DIKSHA ecosystem (NCERT, 2021).
3. **Azim Premji University Studies**: Research on multilingual and inclusive pedagogies reveal significant benefits of mother tongue-based early reading instruction, augmented by visual aids and differentiated classroom practices.
4. **Government of India's NIPUN Bharat:** This mission emphasizes structured phonics, formative assessment, and community involvement. Initial implementation data show reading proficiency rates among Grade 3 increased by 13–18% within two years in pilot districts (Ministry of Education, 2024).

International Agency Reports

1. **World Bank Read@Home:** Rapid response interventions during and post-pandemic with low-cost reading materials, radio, and parental engagement have been effective across Africa and South Asia. Where blended with teacher training, reading outcomes improved by 8–22% over control groups (World Bank, 2022).
2. **UNESCO GEM (2023):** The Global Education Monitoring Report highlights India and Nigeria as models for integrating technology and parental engagement in foundational literacy. The report calls for systemic investment in digital content and teacher networks.
3. **Education Endowment Foundation (2023):** Rigorous RCTs in the U.K. and South Africa confirm that structured, sequenced phonics combined with comprehension instruction and digital tracking tools yield significant reading gains.
4. **USAID Early Literacy Program:** Focused on "structured pedagogy," combining curriculum, teacher materials, and continuous support. Data from Kenya and Nepal show a doubling of basic reading achievement within three years (USAID, 2022).
5. **OECD Education 2030 Framework** (2020): supports the development of broad competencies, including literacy, from early education onwards. It emphasizes the integration of ICT in teaching and

inclusive classroom practices. The OECD's TALIS survey shows that teachers need more support and professional development opportunities focused on foundational literacy.

Method	Contextual Success (India)	Global Validation	Cost-Effectiveness	Impact Level
Phonics Instruction	High	High	Moderate	★★★★★
Whole Language Approach	Moderate	Moderate	Low	★★★
Digital Interventions	High	High	High	★★★★☆
Inclusive & Differentiated Ed.	Moderate to High	High	High	★★★★
Teacher Training (MOOCs/Hybrid)	High	High	Very High	★★★★★

Table 1. Comparative Effectiveness of Methods

Discussion and Critical Analysis

Analysis of contemporary studies and program reports reveals several shared themes:

1. **No Single Silver Bullet:** While phonics is foundational, the best results arise when explicit decoding instruction is complemented by rich literature, oral language activities, and opportunities for meaningful reading (EEF, 2023; Azim Premji, 2023).
2. **The Digital Dividend:** Digital tools expand access and individualization. Yet, they require robust teacher involvement, reliable infrastructure, and local language adaptation for effectiveness (DIKSHA, Pratham, UNESCO GEM, 2023).
3. **Teacher Agency**: Professional development centered on practical demonstrations, peer reflection, and ongoing mentorship fosters sustained impact (Bucuheit, 2023).
4. **Community and Home Engagement:** Parental involvement and community reading events (e.g., Pratham's reading campaigns) boost children's reading motivation and accountability.
5. **Equity and Inclusion:** Differentiation, mother tongue-based early instruction, and peer learning strategies close opportunity gaps for marginalized populations (Azim Premji University, 2023)

Best Practices and Recommendations

Drawing on the above evidence, the following best practices are recommended for improving reading skills among primary school students:

- **Implement Structured Phonics Programs:** Adopt daily, sequenced phonics programs with ongoing assessment, especially in early grades (EEF, 2023).
- **Leverage Digital & Blended Learning:** Use adaptive applications for both in-class and at-home reading practice, linked to teacher dashboards for monitoring progress (DIKSHA, Lexia Core5).
- **Prioritize Continuous Teacher Development:** Establish hybrid models that combine online learning, in-person mentoring, and collaborative communities (NIPUN Bharat, NISHTHA, EEF).
- **Foster Community & Parental Engagement:** Mobilize families through storytelling sessions, community libraries, and parent reading workshops (Pratham, 2023).

- **Promote Inclusion & Differentiation:** Incorporate RTI, small-group work, and mother tongue support within regular classrooms to ensure all learners progress.
- **Policy Coherence and Data Use:** Governments should align reading policies across departments, invest in real-time data collection, and enable corrective action at the school level.

Conceptual Framework for Effective Early Grade Reading

Integrated Framework for Early Grade Reading Improvement:

1. **Assessment-driven instruction** for grouping, progress monitoring, and targeted support.
2. **Core daily instruction** in sequenced phonics and language-rich activities.
3. **Individualized practice** using digital tools and scaffolded materials.
4. **Teacher capacity-building** via blended professional learning and mentoring.
5. **Inclusion** through small group, RTI, and mother-tongue classrooms.
6. **Community and family participation** in reading development.

Figure 1: Integrated Framework for Early Grade Reading

Conclusion

Strong foundational reading skills are vital for every child's educational journey. Over the past four years, research and programmatic success stories—from India's NIPUN Bharat and DIKSHA to global models like Read@Home and EEF's trials—demonstrate that the most effective reading improvement strategies combine explicit, sequenced phonics with print-rich experience, digital innovation, community engagement, and ongoing teacher development. Policy and implementation efforts must remain multi-pronged and adaptive, tailored to diverse contexts. By aligning curriculum, teacher support, digital tools, and inclusive pedagogy, education systems can ensure that no child is left behind on the path to reading proficiency.

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